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ABSTRACT

The "two-step flow" theory of mass communication posits that people are less influenced by the mass media themselves than by those who watch the mass media. Hypotheses were that the two-step flow would predominate in the dissemination of four major news events among college students and that the students' most frequent "source" of knowledge for each of these events would be another person. Results of a poll, using students attending basic communications classes as a sample, did not support these hypotheses. For each event, at least 50% of the sample learned of the event directly from radio or television. One reason for this finding may have been that each of the events was disclosed during "prime time," instead of a period when students were in class. It is concluded that the use of broadcast media during prime time is an effective way to reach college students. (JK)

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DISSEMINATION OF HIGH VALUE
MASS MEDIA INTERNATIONAL NEWS
TO THE COLLEGE STUDENT AUDIENCE

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Considerable research over the past two decades has focused on various factors in the process of man communicating with his fellow man. Studies have taken the form of basic "interpersonal communication" studies and also "mass communication" studies attempting to test the influence of mass media exposure on a variety of populations.

Much of the research related to media influence and opinion change has been done to develop the "two-step flow" of communication.¹ A number of studies have been completed which test the theory.

Allen and Cohen (1966) refer to the two-step flow of mass communication--which posits that we are not so much influenced by mass media as we are by people who observe the media. They further note that people in primary groups tend to divide up topics for specialization--some influence us on sports, others influence us on politics, and so on.² Star and Hughes (1950) found, while studying the effects of a six week campaign in Cincinnati to improve attitudes toward the United Nations, people turned for confirming evidence to "opinion leaders" and through "interpersonal" contact attitudinal changes were made.³

Other studies supporting the theory include Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954),⁴ Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955),⁵ Merton (1957),⁶ Troidahl and Van Dam (1965),⁷ Arndt (1968),⁸ and Allen (1969).⁹ In each of the above studies the theory has been confirmed.

Other studies relating to mass communication have dealt with the two-step flow and the dissemination of information and news events. For example, Budd, MacLean, and Barnes (1966) found, "the greater the news value of an event, the more important will be interpersonal communication in the diffusion process."¹⁰

Similar results were found by Bittner, Seiler, and Anatol (1969)¹¹ in examining mass media news dissemination to college students. Four news events were examined, all dealing with the university. It was discovered the greater the news value of an event, the greater number of persons learned of it first from "another person". However, with the exception of the above cited study, the college student audience has not to any great degree been used as subjects in "mass media" (i.e., radio-television-newspaper) oriented research or in testing the "two-step-flow". Today, this student audience is becoming of critical importance in an age of civil protest and campus unrest when college administrators strive to communicate with students.

The research reported in this paper is an attempt to focus additional attention on the mass media and its ability to communicate to the college student audience. Specifically, this research examines the dissemination of four international news events of high news value which were released during hours of peak media attention.¹²

HYPOTHESIS

Based on previous studies and related research it was hypothesized that 1.) the "two-step flow" would predominate in the dissemination of the news events within the student community and 2.) the students' most frequent "source" of knowledge for each of the four news events would be "another person."

PROCEDURE

Four highly publicized international news events were used as a basis for this research and as a means of examining where university students first receive knowledge of the occurrence of each of the four events. The four news events were 1.) the explosion aboard the apollo 13 spacecraft enroute to the moon, 2.) the death of Charles DeGaulle, former President of France, 3.) the verdict in the court martial of Lt. William Calley, and 4.) the death penalty in the murder trial of Charles Manson.

The four news items were chosen because they were of relatively high news value, resulting in "bulletins" by international wire services, and were first disseminated to the polled student populations during hours of peak broadcast media attention. The story of Apollo 13 emergency broke in the evening hours of April 13, 1970. The story of the death of Charles DeGaulle broke in the early morning hours of November 10, 1970 and was heard during prime time radio hours later the same day. The story of the verdict in the Calley court martial broke in the late afternoon hours of March 29, 1971. The story of the death penalty in the trial of Charles Manson broke in the evening hours of March 29, 1971.

Students (N = 176 - 295)¹³ attending basic communication classes were polled as to where they first became aware of the four news items. A two day time lapse was permitted between the date the news event occurred and the date of classroom polling; thus permitting an opportunity for maximum diffusion of the news event in the university population.

Four major categories were used in classroom polling, each specifying a different means whereby students obtained the first knowledge of the news event. The four categories included 1.) learned of the news event from another person, 2.) learned of the news event through radio-or television, 3.) learned of the news event by reading a newspaper, 4.) was unaware of the news event until polled in class.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One important finding was the overwhelming appearance of radio-television as the means whereby students first learned of the news events.

The numbered data for each of the four categories can be seen in Tables I and II. (Male - female ratios were approximately 3 to 1. Percentages listed are of the total responses for a particular news item.)

TABLE I.

Dissemination Data of International News Events

	APOLLO 13 EMERGENCY	DEATH OF DE GAULLE
RADIO-TV	136 (60%)	184 (62%)
NEWSPAPER	11 (5%)	56 (19%)
ANOTHER PERSON	62 (27%)	54 (18%)
UNAWARE UNTIL POLLED	17 (8%)	1 (.3%)
TOTALS	N = 226 (100%)	N = 295 (100%)*

*99.3% unrounded percentage

TABLE II

Dissemination Data of International News Events

	CALLEY VERDICT	MANSON DEATH PENALTY
RADIO-TV	118 (65%)	88 (50%)
NEWSPAPER	39 (21%)	35 (20%)
ANOTHER PERSON	18 (10%)	18 (10%)
UNAWAKE UNTIL POLLED	8 (4%)	35 (20%)
TOTALS	N = 183 (100%)	N = 176 (100%)

Such findings are contradictory to previous research by Bittner, Seiler, and Anatol which found news stories released during hours other than peak media attention did not show radio - television as a predominant first source of knowledge. In fact the radio - television category polled no higher than 14%. In the research reported in this paper the radio - television category polled 60% for the Apollo 13 emergency, 62% for the death of Charles DeGaulle, 65% for the Calley verdict, and 50% for the Manson death penalty; thus the first part of the hypothesis was rejected.

Also, results indicate a trend toward heavy "prime-time" media attention among the college student population. For those persons attempting to communicate to the college student population the broadcast media would seem to be a very effective means of reaching this population if messages are channeled in hours of high media attention.

Since all four news events were released in prime time, students were probably not attending classes at the time of release. Therefore the opportunity for interpersonal interaction with other students was reduced. This may account for the large number of students who became aware of the four stories by means of the mass media. Had the stories been released in morning hours when students are normally in class, the number of student in the "another person" category may have been larger.

Such findings indicate a need to re-examine the "two-step flow" theory as it applies to college student populations. Previous research found interpersonal communication as a dominant source of news in times other than high media attention hours. The research reported contradicts such findings when high value news is disseminated in times of high media attention.

FOOTNOTES

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¹Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, The Peoples Choice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).

²Thomas J. Allen and Stephen I. Cohen, Information Flow in An R and D Laboratory (Cambridge, 1966).

³Shirley A. Star and Helen MacGill Hughes, "Report of an Educational Campaign: The Cincinnati Plan for the United Nations," American Journal of Sociology, 55 (1950), pp. 389-400.

⁴Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

⁵Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1955).

⁶Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957).

⁷Verling Trodahl and Robert Van Dam, "Face to Face Communication about Major Topics in the News," Public Opinion Quarterly, 29 (Winter, 1965-66), pp. 626-634.

⁸Johan Arndt, "A Test of the Two-Step Flow in Diffusion of a New Product," Journalism Quarterly, 45 (Autumn, 1968), pp. 457-465.

⁹Irving L. Allen, "Social Relations and the Two-Step Flow: A Defense of the Tradition," Journalism Quarterly, 46 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 492-498.

¹⁰Richard W. Budd, Malcom C. MacLean Jr., and Arthur Barnes, "Regularities in the Diffusion of Two Major News Events," Journalism Quarterly, 43 (Summer, 1966), pp. 221-230.

¹¹John R. Bittner, William J. Seiler, and Karl W. Anatol, "College Student Exposure to Mass Media News," College Student Survey, 3 (Fall, 1969), pp. 46-48.

¹²6:00 A.M. - 9:00 A.M. and 7:00 P.M. - 11:00 P.M. are used as a basis for defining hours of peak media attention.

¹³Ns varied depending on class attendance during the days polling was completed.